

Winning Politically

Extract of Speech to IUF 26th Congress, May 2012

By Ron Oswald

Comradeship is a huge part of why we win and particularly why we win in situations where the odds suggest we should not or even cannot win.

It takes many things to win of course: strategy, resources, timing, commitment and sometimes even a little luck. But cold strategy and even substantial resources are not in themselves enough. Winning without building on that sense of comradeship and coming out of a fight without our comradeship strengthened might not even be winning at all.

We are a movement built on comradeship. We can disagree. We can fight around issues and apparently we often do – sometimes a little obsessively and certainly more than is good for us. But if we abandon the sense of common spirit, common purpose and, yes, comradeship we risk losing even when we appear to win.

It is fundamentally that I believe we need to continue to build our organization on. And critically it is that that we have that those we oppose, in particular major corporations, lack completely.

Corporations can match and outstrip us in resources – of course they can – after all they accumulate those resources largely from the labour of our members. They can purchase brainpower to develop great strategy and they can even get lucky. But they have no soul. Corporations are not human.

Corporations increasingly have no human rationale for doing what they do today. They have greed and growth and the simple logic that more at any cost is better than less. They repeat the mantra of growth over and over again, often in my experience in an apparently quasi-hypnotic state which would be comical were it not so serious. With it they convince and reassure each other and then try to convince us or coerce us to believe that corporate growth and accumulation is some kind of universal law of nature and that the absence of growth would be more catastrophic than anything that might result from an absence of food to feed a billion people or the absence of human rights. More serious than the consequences of climate change or even of any natural planetary disaster one might imagine.

Corporate growth is of course no such thing. It stems from the logic of accumulation which is chosen and then imposed. It is certainly not natural. It can be challenged, it must be challenged and one day it will need to be stopped and reversed. But they cannot challenge it by definition precisely because it has today become their only reason to exist. They cannot do so because people in them have no capacity for independent thought outside that logic. In an almost tragic way it is not even those people's fault any more. They are trapped in a logic they cannot challenge.

But before we all shed a tear remember corporations are not human and they have no soul and deserve no tears. Counterparts they may be but they are not our mirror images.

They have cut throats and careers. We have compassion and comradeship. They have profit and productivity. We have purpose and passion. They pursue all that that jingles and we pursue the

sound of justice.

And make no mistake, though they often claim they do, they cannot and will never understand us. With our values we are as alien to them as we would be if we came from Mars or Venus.

They use words like “values”, “ethics” and on occasion, often perversely, “human rights” but only as means to the one thing that drives them – profit and the growth they need in their endless search for more.

In reality they have no idea what words like “value” and “ethics” should or truly do represent.

They often claim to be obsessed with rights but when the surface gets scraped – and we all scrape that surface in the work we do and in the fights we wage – their obsession with rights becomes clearly visible.

When we dig down we find the rights they truly treasure. Their right to manage, their right to protect their investments, their intellectual property rights, their rights to dominate, to enslave and to exploit and their right to greed.

Our values – for we truly have some – and our comradeship and humanity is what distinguishes us most from our counterparts on the other side of our permanent struggle. Our values and comradeship will always stand in the way of the greedy and the oppressor and thus we present a threat to them and we should be proud to do so if the world is not to descend further into barbarism. Our comradeship and our values are what we have that they can never have, what we understand that they can never understand and what we have that they cannot and will never defeat, corrupt or repress however the ebbs and flows of the daily battles we fight might run...

... As a movement we more often than not have the right arguments and the most just of just causes. But those arguments are too often made as polite whispers or even worse like suggestion slips that in past times at workplaces you would drop into the bosses’ suggestion box. In my experience the boss would then make money off the good ones and ignore the ones they don’t like from people they then try to sack if they can find them!

Of course we know that whispered voices can be powerful because we whisper of justice, of fairness, of an end to repression, of peace and of a world of enlightenment, tolerance and civilization. But a whisper is a whisper and I believe that our whisper risks going increasingly unheard against the cacophony of intolerance, of racism and xenophobia, of sexism, of homophobia and of greed as the world grows ever more divided between those in the centre of the world’s wealth and those on the oppressed and exploited periphery.

Against that cacophony stands our whisper. A powerful whisper for sure because it is righteous but one that for some time was growing dangerously softer.

And yet in recent years there has never been a greater need to stop whispering, to stop making suggestions to be dropped into a global suggestion box politely suggesting what kind of world we want only to have those suggestions emptied into the trash.

It is increasingly a time to rise up and make noise. And millions have been doing so. The Occupy Movements around the world, the “indignado” in Spain and many others. Who are they? Crazy unrealistic young people who don’t understand the ways of the world? No. They are not only often our sons and daughters but they are also us. They are truly inspirational parts of our broader

movement and have declared that the world no longer works except for those who pillage its wealth and rape its workforce. And they are right!

We cannot allow any of those allies, for allies they are, to be isolated and much less ridiculed and crushed by those whose power they spit in the face of. We need to join them. We have to join them. I am convinced that if we and our values survive as they will, and they must lest the world descend further into barbarism, we will one day need to thank them if nothing else for waking us up.

Of course they are flawed. But if we are honest we too are pretty flawed – it's just that some of our flaws are so old they have healed over or cauterized to the point that we perhaps don't see them any more if we ever did. Part of our crisis in the trade union movement today is that too many young people, too many women and too many workers on the periphery see our flaws only too clearly. We need to better see those people and listen to them more seriously than our flawed eyesight and hearing too often has allowed us to do to date.

Our world can be changed. We know that only too well because we have seen it do so and not for the better, at least not for the 99%. Those we confront daily have changed it radically and have done so classically through a series of crises of capitalism that have allowed them to restructure us, to realign our expectations, to attack our hopes and our belief in ourselves all in their attempt to crush us.

As we sit here today we have seen the latest of these crises of capitalism turned deftly now to somehow justify impoverishing further the 99% and enriching those with their snouts in the trough. The current crisis has changed the world but not in a way that benefits all or even most. And such crises never will unless we rise up and join those who have taken to shouting in outrage rather than whispering in frustration. You know that. I know that. And yet somehow we still on occasion stop short of meaningfully and radically doing so and of taking the risks that go with it.

Perhaps our fighting muscles are a little atrophied and need some exercise. Well the gymnasium of struggle is right in front of us and the doors are open as widely today as they have been for generations.

Perhaps we are too tired. Given we have been for so long in permanent struggle often outgunned and facing huge odds we have of course a right to be tired. But even if we are understandably tired being tired gives us absolutely no right to stop fighting or to not even start.

We hear a lot about signs of awakening. There may be lots of signs. But I am getting older as we all are and as my eyesight gets weaker reading these subtle signs becomes more difficult with every day. There may be signs and there certainly has been plenty of smoke – and maybe a few too many mirrors – but we cannot assume any of that means fire. We must join together and rise up to light a fire of protest and revolt under the world we are presented with today and simply and unceremoniously unseat those who sit in splendid dominance of it.

Whilst not suggesting a course of action based literally on the many placards of protest saying "One day the poor will have nothing left to eat but the rich" –they probably taste as bitter and as disgusting as they often act and besides there are vegetarians amongst us – it certainly is true that a day is coming when the "have nots" will rise up in huge numbers and that day I believe is coming faster than many people think.

The greater danger though is that, as we have already seen recently and back in history, they will rise up not against the “haves” but rather against other “have nots” and fall into the ever more sophisticated trap of the extreme right. If that happens we are lost.

We must offer a new world. One that is understood – even the more complicated parts of it. And one that yes is also popular – for populism cannot be left as the monopoly of the right.

A world our members and those on the periphery can believe in. We need to listen to them when they tell us what their lives and experience have told them is not working for them. They say they don’t want free trade – don’t tell them that some caveat in a WTO document is what they need. No. They don’t want free trade! Their lives and experiences give them good reasons for saying so.

Listen to them when they say they don’t want the current pro-capital construction of Europe. Don’t tell them to strive for a “Europe with a social face” on capital’s terms. They don’t want that and their lives and experiences give them good reason for saying so.

If we do not engage our own people, listen to them and answer their fears in ways that make sense when set against their experiences then recent electoral evidence in France and in Greece show us clearly who they think are listening to them and to whom they will naively turn in their desperation to be heard. The fascists, the racists, the homophobes and the extreme right

Societies that are built on principles of justice for all, rights for all, work for all, food for all and fairness for all are not easy to explain. Not least because we don’t have a hell of a lot of examples of such societies to fall back on and draw examples from. I am not sure I can. But it is imperative we do and thus imperative we restore one of the oldest and yet most abandoned tools of the labour movement – political education.

Not just telling already committed members to go deliver leaflets or talk to people at election times. But going back to basics and winning new minds and new hearts to a vision of a world which we are constantly being told cannot exist because it is “unrealistic” or utopian – or put simply as it is so often and persistently today, because we cannot afford it. Who cannot afford it? We? Well I can tell you now it is not us? Even though most of us increasingly cannot afford anything – a decent pension, education for our kids, health care, a decent life and more it is definitely not us.

No they cannot afford it. They cannot afford it because it would threaten their continued accumulation of wealth and even more critically it would challenge that they almost certainly treasure even more – their absolute power on which is built their absolute arrogance and their ability to accumulate unchallenged.

But thousands challenged just that with huge courage last year in the Arabic-speaking world. Thousands are still prepared to sacrifice apparently everything in that part of the world today to continue to fight to change their world. We say we are inspired by them. We rightly praise their courage. But we need to debate why we do not do the same.

What is stopping us and what has to change to make us move as they have done and as popular revolts have done in the past?

Certainly there are sufficient crises today that should leave the world screaming out for change. The planet is dying, war in different forms is everywhere, the poor are increasingly becoming the dialysis machine to replenish the veins leading to the coffers of the rich, democracy is threatened by the privatisation of the political process through the power of finance or simply the direct

corruption of money and the rise of the far right.

The periphery will not wait forever and they are right not to do so. As the Italian Communist Antonio Gramsci put it as he languished in fascist jails in the 1930s: “The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born.” I cannot imagine a time in my years on this earth when that has been truer.

It is time to join with the millions of mid-wives straining to give birth to the new. The new may be born kicking and screaming as often happens. The old will certainly go down kicking and screaming and those kicks will in many cases come from jackboots. But surely it is time.

And who will bring about the new if not our movement defined in its broadest terms. Of all the challenges we will explore at our congress, defending the right to a proper job, the right to food and building our strength, our political challenge is perhaps the greatest we face and have faced for generations. We need new foundations and constructions for our economies so they become the engines of decent and fair societies. We need a new model of politics which is not predominantly in private hands or guided by finance and their various cohorts. A model of politics that dictates economics based on political choices and not the reverse. Our session on the last day is titled “Winning Politically”. We are of course far from that but a truly challenging and rigorous examination of where we really are rather than where we might delude ourselves we are and where we need to get to must be at the top of our agenda at these critical times. Our congress I hope will make a small contribution to that process.

Ron Oswald is the General Secretary of the International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers’ Associations (IUF). This is an edited version of his address to the IUF Congress in 2012.
